Facebook© Goes to College: Using Social Networking Tools to Support Students Undertaking Teaching Practicum

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Abstract

The impact of Web 2.0 and social networking tools on education has been much commented on. Teachers need to consider how to meet the needs of their students utilising Web 2.0 and other social networking tools. However, tertiary institutions are beginning to recognise that the currently enrolled undergraduate student body is also increasingly Web 2.0 proficient. The focus of undergraduate education degrees has primarily been the use of Web 2.0 tools to teach future school students. However, institutions are now realising that these same tools can be used to create pedagogically sound learning environments for pre-service teachers. This paper will explore the use of social networking tools, such as Facebook©, to support students undertaking teaching practicum. It will introduce a project that involved a cohort of business education students currently enrolled in education degrees at Queensland University of Technology. These students were habitual users of Facebook©, and a group page was created to examine their experiences and behaviours during their teaching practicum placements. This paper will suggest how the digital behaviours and habits of students enrolled in this course may be used in developing supportive tools that can be harnessed during practicum periods.

Keywords: Social Networking, Web 2.0, pre-service teacher education, online communities

Introduction

There have been several studies conducted with education students and the use of discussion forums while they are on teaching practicum in schools (Barnett, Keating, Harwood and, Saam, 2002; Rye and Katayama, 2003). These have generally been housed within Learning Management Systems (LMS), such as Blackboard©, within a currently enrolled unit. The prevalence of LMSs within tertiary education has meant that students are potentially members of multiple online unit-based discussion groups. If participation in the discussion group is not attached to formal assessment, then a paucity of responses is to be expected. Often there is an initial flurry of activity as students ask for advice, help, contact details, resources and general assistance. However, this initial activity often diminishes over time, which has left lecturers pondering why these discussion forums cannot be sustained during teaching practicums. Could the lack of participation be a problem with the LMSs themselves? Do these online learning tools provide environments that lead to sustained social collaboration away from campus or study imperatives?

These questions guided the following study. During the 2008 semester one practicum period, it was decided that the Facebook© behaviour and activities of an undergraduate cohort would be capitalised upon. The cohort was fourth year business education students, who had 'friended' their lecturer on

Facebook©. A short survey revealed that the majority of students had Facebook© accounts so the technology had a high uptake rate among this group of students. Hence, a Facebook© group was created for these students during their four-week teaching practicum. A broad analysis revealed that 64% (n=18) of the total students who joined the Facebook© group (n=28) actively participated in the group, by posting more than one message on the wall. The group garnered 100 messages; hence, it would appear that this manifestation of online discussion groups might be more active over a sustained timeframe.

Web 2.0 technologies are making an impact in the communicative behaviours of individuals. Abbitt (2007, p. 1) stated that there has been "tremendous growth in the popularity of websites focusing on social activities and collaboration"; this would include online applications such as Facebook©. Facebook© describes itself as a "social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them" (Facebook, 2008, p. 1). Somewhere among its "more than 80 million active users" (Facebook, 2008, p. 2) were the fourth year business education students (*N* = 30), and this prior experience helped to naturalise its use by them while on practicum. This paper will describe the process of adopting a Facebook© group for students while on practicum and will discuss the affordances such accessible social networking communities may bring to educational environments. It will describe the pedagogical strategy adopted by staff to use Facebook© as a means to connect with students while they are on practicum and conclude with an analysis of the findings. Further, it will hypothesise the advantages and disadvantages of using this kind of freely available social networking application to support classroom learning.

Background

Several recent papers that have examined the building of online communities have dealt with different aspects of online community building in classroom environments. In his paper on the use of social content strategies in an undergraduate educational technology course, Abbitt (2007) used a Coldfusion system to allow students to add resources and have these rated by their peers. In another example, Roper (2008) utilised an asynchronous online discussion tool to allow students to participate in her online undergraduate labour/management relations class. Similarly, McElrath and McDowell (2008) examined Brown's theory of community building in their online distance education course. Reil (2000) argues for the use of discussion forums in classroom interaction, stating that the effectiveness of a discussion forum to build community is its ability to create a shared interest and learning goal for students. The students are involved in an inquiry process that produces knowledge shared with a group and made public, usually through the LMS and is available to the whole group of learners. While each of these provides a useful background to the project, their methodologies and outcomes were slightly different. In this paper, the authors are examining how pre-existing, online community software can be used to develop a community among students who are in a quasi distance mode as a result of their practicum placements but who are already part of a classroom based community and know each other in the "real world".

The current student cohort within tertiary institutions is typically more digitally fluent than previous cohorts. They use Web 2.0 habitually and fluently to create user-generated digital content that they produce and share via tools, such as blogs, digital image repositories (e.g. Flickr), digital audio or video files and SMS messages. Perhaps a distinguishing feature of this cohort is their participation in community. The behaviours they exhibit are generally collaborative and communicative; they share their digital content, ideas, opinions and experiences *online*. Community appears to be an increasingly online or virtual behaviour. As Bishop (2006) concluded, "online communities are increasingly becoming an accepted part of the lives of Internet users, serving to fulfill their desires to interact with and help others" (p.1881). It is the desire to build communities that leads to the implementation of a discussion forum in tertiary classes. How then can academics harness this increasingly accepted behaviour? Wellman, Boase, and Chen (2002) explored how the Internet or being online has changed the sense of community, if it had weakened, enhanced or transformed it in some way. Opinion will remain divided, but what is clear is that the use of social networking tools and their popularity among users continues to increase.

As the authors have previously suggested, our current student cohort are digitally fearless and use new forms of technology as they are released. These are powerful behaviours and ones that institutions have been slow to utilise. Typically, as these behaviours have been identified, LMSs have sought to replicate

them via the addition of discussion lists, blog tools, and wikis on platforms such as Blackboard. However, what has been noted is that there is marked difference in the way these have been used by students. This project sought to use a Web 2.0 tool, Facebook©, that was a habitual digital tool of the cohort involved in the study.

Pedagogical strategy

The group was set up by the lecturer and was "closed", meaning that potential members had to "request permission" to join the group through Facebook©. Two "administrators" were nominated, the lecturer and a colleague who was to teach the unit in the following semester. The students were encouraged to join the group in a face-to-face classroom setting two weeks before practicum placements started. At this time, the students were required to attend class during the workshop to present and assess their peers' assignment task, and approximately 90% of the enrolled cohort attended this session (n=28). The students were in a classroom with a small computer lab. They were shown how to access the group page; several students joined during the initial class discussion. In order to ensure that all students were given the opportunity to be involved, an email was sent through Blackboard to all students reminding them about the group page and reiterating the joining instructions.

The members of the Facebook© group were mainly the undergraduate cohort of students who had met before in a subject in second year and may have had other contact throughout the four years of their degree. The five postgraduate students did not apply to join the group. One student from a different class requested to join the group but was declined as she was not enrolled in the unit and would not be going on a practicum placement. The majority of activity was on "the wall" described by Facebook© as "a forum for your friends to post comments or insights about you" (Facebook, 2008a, p.1). "The wall" is a front page application in Facebook© that is available when you open the group page. Its ease of use and its availability on the front page probably contributed to its high level of use by the students.

The wall posts required a substantial amount of seeding by the lecturer who acted as one of the administrators of the group. The wall posts were seeded by the lecturer in order to answer questions that the students were posing and were unable to answer. This meant that the vast majority of posts (31) were posted by the lecturer acting as the group's administrator with one of the rural and remote student posting the second largest number of seeds (17). Four administrator posts were a result of a student who was on an international practicum placement having difficulty accessing the site from China, one student who was on a rural and remote placement was not able to access the site at all and also required the administrator to post for her, her school had blocked the Facebook© application. Facebook© is often blocked by schools as a behaviour management strategy; it is used to keep students on task while in computer lab classes. Two discussion forums were started by one rural student who also posted 32 photographs and two of the three video posts to the group page.

"The wall" posts were analysed by the two administrators. Five themes were deduced from the posts. These were Excitement, Problem, Joke, Solution and Other. The Other category was the largest theme. It included group reinforcement such as encouraging more posts, advice on teaching resources or behaviour management, checking on others and making links, which included talking to students who were on a practicum placement in a school with which another student had involvement. Often this involvement was an alumnus, or it involved previous practicum placements in the school. In other cases, the link involved a student relative who was involved at the school as a teacher or staff member or as a student. Excitement was the second largest theme, which was most prevalent at the beginning of the four week period (before practicum placement expressing excitement about going on the practicum) and at the end of the four week period with students expressing excitement about their careers as teachers.

Three discussion topics were set up and attracted 15 posts. Two of these discussion topics were requested by a member of the group via email to the administrator/lecturer; he was unable to create the discussion forums as he was not an administrator of the group. The lack of activity in this section of the group page can probably be seen to be a result of the steps required to access discussion topics. The wall is available on page one and the box to input a thread is accessed from the front page of the group's site; the discussion forum requires three steps to gain access. The first involves clicking on the discussion topic, the second requires you to select "reply to [poster]", and only then are participants able to post to the discussion. The discussion topics were not heavily seeded by the administrator/lecturer which might also explain their lack of use.

Results and discussion

The posts to the discussion topics were coded into five broad themes, using a broad based, thematic analysis, which involved several steps. Once all the data had been collected, the group wall was read to identify themes that occurred in the data. Initially, the posts were grouped according to identifiable themes which were named Other, Excitement, Problem, Joke and Solution. These five themes represented the most identifiable concepts or issues discussed in the post and were, in order of frequency Other (n=54), Excitement (n=37), Problem (n=20), Joke (n=19) and Solution (n=18). There were 100 posts on the wall over the four week period; some of the posts were categorised into two themes. For purposes of clarity and organisation, the results will be presented through these five themes.

(a) Other

This category contained the largest number of posts (*n*=54) and largely included posts that were associated with affective communication such as group reinforcement, encouragement and support. These posts were generally initiated by the students themselves and were often answers or comments made in response to another posting or a general update, for example,

> "HEY[sic],
> I just got home from my first full teaching day. It was awesome! Had so much fun. I'm exhausted though, no sleep for the wikid [sic] though... many lessons to prepare for tomorrow plus grade 12 assignments to mark. Just wanted to say it's great reading all of your stories from your schools". [KB05/12/2008]

These posts were typically positive and encouraging in nature indicating that the group sense of community was strong among participants. There appeared to exist an implicit imperative for members to respond and post messages within a short timeframe, which would indicate that they were regularly online and participating. Hence motivation and engagement would appear to be quite high.

(b) Excitement

This category contained the second largest number of posts (*n*=37) and was unique as it had two clear periods of contribution, at the start of the field practicum and towards the end. The postings made at the start of the field practicum were positive, excited, and anticipatory regarding the upcoming field practicum placement. Those posted at the end of the period were more supportive and encouraging everyone to keep going as they concluded their placement. An example is this posting from the start of the field practicum:

> "hey well my first day at [XY] high went great! there are a few other prac[ticum] teachers there but yeah don't think I will have much to do with them as they are in totally different teaching areas....I have a lovely prac[ticum] supervising teacher and the best staffroom and they are all lovely and really welcoming! got my own desk and have been given heaps of resources already!!!! its great!! [sic] get to teach year 11 and 12 bct as well as year 9 sose and year 10 geography! should be great! Although [sic] my geog [sic] supervising teacher is away this week so not sure if I will get to teach anything in that field this week! good luck to everyone :)" [AN05/06/2008]

The posts in this category were typically quite long (more than 50 words) and hence would indicate that whilst they were largely concerned with expressing excitement at commencing or finishing practicum, they displayed a level of detail. This commitment to explain and engage in community discussions was an interesting phenomenon to observe as it implies a building of a community among the students.

(c) Problem

This category contained the third largest number of posts (*n*=20) and largely included posts that were associated with problems concerned with nerves, lack of resources, concern over teaching a particular subject for the first time, problems with students, problems with resources and problems with practicum supervisors. An example of these types of posts is:

> ".....I wud [sic] like to ask anyone who knows the answer a quick question. My supervising teacher left for England yesterday & her replacement is a first year & by 1st year I mean the class she has on Monday morning will be her first class EVER [sic]. Is she allowed to be my supervising teacher? I

> wasn't sure if there were rules etc to the requirements of a supervising teacher & what's worse is that she is IT and English & she is supervising my BCT classes. Anyone know? We took a class together the other day and it will be interesting cuse [sic] the kids just walk straight over her. The double last week had last 20 mins as free time. Let me know please". [AH05/18/2008]

The posts in this category were quite complex, but could be broadly grouped as those pertaining to specific classroom-based problems (such as student behaviour or resources) and those pertaining to problems with supervisors (see example above). It would be interesting to correlate the problems that were raised in this forum to those raised with the visiting liaison lecturers. Did members of this group solve their problems online rather than via more traditional methods such as face-to-face meetings with staff? Were more problems raised and discussed via this method as they were peer-based or because they did not have such formalised processes attached to them?

(d) Joke

This category contained a relatively small amount of posts (*n*=19) and was largely indicative of the sense of comradeship and connection between the students. There were postings that were self-deprecating for not contributing more or comments on mistakes made on practicum, and these generally created a sense of togetherness amongst the group. An example of these types of posts;

> "Okay note to self: Students are feral a) after [a big football match], b) on rainy days.... I'm sure I'm going to just keep adding to this list". [FC05/29/2008]

(e) Solution

This category contained the smallest number of posts (*n*=18) and were largely directed at problems or issues posted by other students. The example below indicates a response to the problem post described above.

> "[student's name],
> both of my teachers were absent one day each of last week and the substitute teacher that was there is Early Childhood trained and treats the seniors as if they were 6! She tried to take over the class that I had total control over and mentioned to her quietly that just because im [sic] a student teacher doesn't mean I don't know how to make a class work. Kids out here talk all the time and as long as their pens are moving at the same time it's all okay.
>
> "I would ask for another teacher to supervise your lessons. Someone with real experience with dealing with kids. Don't let some fresh hot shot run you over...
>
> "Maybe I'm just talking to myself??? And has anybody picked up their [different subject] stuff yet? Maybe [university name] can post my assignments to me" [JM05/18/2008]

It was interesting to note that the number of problem (*n=20)* and solution *(n=18)* posts were relatively matched. This group tool would appear to be an effective problem-solving resource. It should be further noted that many of the solutions were offered by the peer-group not by their lecturer.

Discussion

Thus, this small-scale study offers an insight into the use the Web 2.0 tool, Facebook©, that was digital tool used habitually by the business studies cohort involved in the study. The majority of posts were associated with affective communication such as group reinforcement, encouragement, and support which may suggest that the sense of community was strong in this group, but also that the key use of these types of online tools may lie more in the affective domain. Students undertaking practicum studies would appear to need more support from their peers and lecturers during this period, however, it is difficult to provide this type of personalised care. Perhaps Web 2.0 may offer a solution to this problem?

Conclusion

This paper has described the use of social networking tools, such as Facebook©, to support students undertaking teaching practicum. It described a project that involved a cohort of business education students who used a Facebook© group page as a support tool during their teaching practicum placements. The results have indicated that the digital behaviours and habits of students enrolled in

tertiary studies may be used in developing supportive tools that can be harnessed during practicum periods.

However, it should be noted that this is a pilot study for a larger body of work into undergraduate education students' usage of Web 2.0 tools and their engagement with ICTs. The small number of students and their relationships, which had been established two years earlier, and over their involvement in other subjects throughout the four years of their degree may have skewed the data in favour of the Facebook© group, creating an enthusiasm and a community that might not otherwise have been present. It would be interesting to replicate this study with the postgraduate cohort who do not know each other and who meet for the first time when the enroll in their first Business Education Curriculum Studies subject. A comparison between the data reported here and this cohort of students might provide a different result. Similarly, the cohort size for this group was quite small. A study which examined the use of Facebook© groups among much larger cohorts of students and the community built in large student groups might also provide another perspective on the building of community among students who are away on practicum placements and who rely on Facebook© to connect with their peers.

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